

Lea

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

**VOL 17 NO 1** A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from

**Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese**

and other important cultural operators.

M I S H  
W V 2 H

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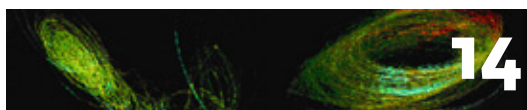
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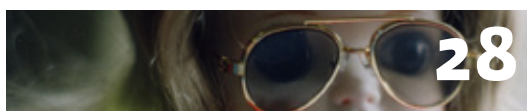
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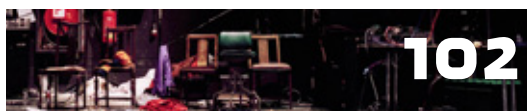
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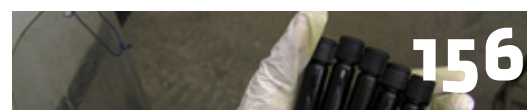
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# Electronic Literature as a Sword of Lightning

by

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ABSTRACT

*This essay analyzes the humanistic potential of digital poetry in the age of new media. By way of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry,” theories of the posthuman, and the tradition of Marxist critique, this essay aims to identify an occasion for hope within the new media arts. Reading electronic literature through Shelley’s metaphor of poetry as a “sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it,” Heckman analyzes the ethical dimensions of literature against the backdrop of technocapitalism and instrumental theories of the human. The essay concludes with a discussion of intersubjectivity, politics, and love.*

*Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. |*

— Percy Bysshe Shelley

**I love electronic literature because I hate computers.**

**I know it sounds crazy, because everyone who knows me surely must think that I love my computer.** I’ve been active in online publishing for about 10 years. I served as a tech editor for the journal *Rhizomes*, a founding editor of *Reconstruction* (which was initially described as an “online cultural studies community”), and recently responded to Jason Nelson’s call to help launch *Netpoetic*. So confessing my irrational hatred for a thing that I rely upon everyday must come as a surprise to many of you who are reading this.

And to be fair, there is more to my antipathy than meets the eye. I don’t really hate particular computerized gadgets; rather, I hate the love of the thing. Underneath what you see is a tangle of circuits, twitching with an energy that is slowly burning our world to a crisp, soldered together by some poor underpaid person in a sweatshop, and running on highly technical (and often hidden) languages. For all this human sacrifice, a computer is still just a machine. It just crunches

numbers and does what it’s told. Yet, we are often told things like “Social networking will bring the end of capitalism!” or “Kids are more information savvy than any generation in human history!” If techno-capitalism is a religion, the computer is its word made flesh, here to free us from our sins and lead us into utopia.

And so, when I approach the altar of the god-machine, whether it is in my office or in my home, rather than pray, the spirit of revolt seizes me. Sometimes I want to pull its plug. Sometimes I want to pretend it is not there. Sometimes I want to break it, slam its head in a door, toss it down a flight of stairs, and kick it out a window.

But how better to break the computer than to subvert its purpose, to make it the vessel of the human?

Now, I am not talking about using the computer as a tool. I am not talking about using a computer to facilitate activities like communication or relaxation, sexuality or scholarship. Facilitation is the virtue that leads to efficiency and interdependence. I am not talking about smoothing over the bumps of daily life or salving

the embittered psyche. I am talking about using the computer itself to transmit truths that are contrary to its own nature – I am talking about the ultimate and original hack – I am talking about poetry.

In order to better understand this, we need to first understand the origins of our crisis. To get beyond the various hymns that we mistake for blasphemies (The death of God, the end of history, the death of the author, and the death of the human), we must first revisit the problem. While many revel in the various clichéd perversions that can be found with equal ease at the shopping mall, on TV, or in your inbox, we have to accept that a revolutionary gesture is only revolutionary if it revolts against something. The only kings that can be overthrown are those that are enthroned. And the only revolutions worth having are those that have the potential to fail.

To do this, I am going to look back to the past, towards the origins of techno-capitalism (Which, in its own way, is transgressive). Second, I will advance a definition of poetry (Another sin). Third, I am going to do this by way of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" (Which, as sad as it is to say, is yet another violation of the order of things). The method we will use will be the opposite of "common sense," which some will regard as "nonsense," but which I hope might be "uncommon sense."

To begin, I would like to offer here an alternate definition of "posthumanism" and how we have arrived at it. The conventional take on posthumanism goes as follows: Through science and/or theory, humanism has come to an end.

What exactly this means is not clear. To look to Nietzsche's *ubermensch* (sometimes translated as "superman"), the posthuman may refer to those individuals that are able to exceed the limitations of

humanity, and advance the world's potential through a break with history and a pursuit of radically new ethics based on becoming rather than tradition. Nietzsche writes, "I teach you the Superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed."<sup>2</sup> To extrapolate this view into an ethical system for a larger moral community, this conception of the posthuman is a future-oriented system of value that is uninhibited by moral attachments rooted in nostalgia for the past, but is geared towards the apprehension of the greater good through any means that are readily available. To be reductive, it is a doctrine of progress with no apologies – a moral imperative to transcend humanity through human effort.

Taking its cue from Nietzsche's rejection of essential moral truths that can be taken for granted is another posthumanism, one that describes the simple facts of being. For Heidegger, this conception of subjectivity is outside of the Enlightenment notions of the self, which present the subject as a coherent and rational entity whose being is bound to the clearly delineated human body. The phenomenological approach to subjectivity rejects essentialist notions of the self, instead offering up an image of subjectivity based on knowledge as experience of the self. Heidegger discusses this notion in the relationship between the worker and the tool:

*Hammering does not just have a knowledge of the useful character of the hammer; rather, it has appropriated this useful thing in the most adequate way possible. [...] The less we stare at the thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing. The act of hammering itself discovers the "handiness" of the hammer.*<sup>3</sup>

Instead of presenting a clearly delineated model of the person as contained within the tidy confines of the body, this alternate discourse of subjectivity suggests that what one thinks of when one considers oneself might include a variety of everyday items and experiences, from hammers to chairs to ideas about the world. This model of the person considers subjectivity as an ongoing process with no clear boundaries, and takes into consideration the very real fact that at times a person's subjectivity is capable of migrating out of the body and into clothing, other people, tools, or any other potential site for meaning and identification. This messy configuration is simply a part of being in the world.

Interestingly enough, these developments in philosophy are paralleled by changes in science and the understanding of the brain, along with the accelerated development of media in the twentieth century. As Peter Conrad observes, "The body has been curiously rewired in the twentieth century, routing all erotic sensations through the head."<sup>4</sup> Complementing this view is a conception of consciousness put forward in the sciences, which presumes a certain level of rationalism as the basis for experimentation.

Without rehashing the entire history of poststructuralist critiques of Modernity, I'd like to point out the relationship uniquely postmodern vantage point of contemporary theories of the posthuman. As Mark Poster explains,

*The problem with Enlightenment, modernist, and Marxist deployments of "reason" concerns the association of reason with a configuration of the subject as autonomous and implicitly male, as a neutral, contextless "transcendental ego" capable of determining truth in a way that associates truth with ontological specifications.*<sup>5</sup>

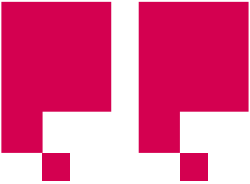
This conception of the posthuman, arriving by way of scholars like Althusser and Foucault, allows scholars total agency in the critique of dominant paradigms by offering up a model of subjectivity which exists contrary to the humanist conception and its claims to truth and authority. The conception of the posthuman is a strategy to critique any sort of foundationalism or fundamentalism by simply rejecting the subjectivity of its adherents outright.

The discourse of the posthuman makes its particular appeal to scholars and activists in radical positions who did not want to see old systems of power simply replaced with new ones. As a result, traditional notions of subjectivity had to be rejected altogether in order to maintain a consistently liberating theoretical position. For scholars of race, class, and gender, the posthuman subject would offer a new hope for a conception of the person that was never to be determined by coercion, but instead by radical subjectivity. In this conception, posthuman claims to "citizenship" or rights are governed not by the rigid (and potentially dangerous) Truth of the humanistic order, but by individuals acting in community to implement anti-essentialist practices – the notion of the "person" itself democratized.


For scholars like N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, the posthuman promise is that people will be liberated to conceive of more inclusive notions of the person unavailable under the rigidly demarcated notions of the human. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway writes of the benefits of "leaky distinctions":

*Many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures. Movements for animal rights are not rational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. Biology*





## If the good things in human life are art, love, and friendship, capitalism is an empirically codified system of alternate priorities.



and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. <sup>6</sup>

A truly posthuman era would embrace animals, intelligent computers, robots, cyborgs, clones, and assemblages in the family of persons. And, as Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* argues,

*If the three stories told here – how information lost its body, how the cyborg was constructed in the postwar years as technological artifact and cultural icon, and how the human became posthuman – have at times seemed to be feared and abhorred rather than welcomed and embraced, that reaction has everything to do with how the posthuman is constructed and understood. <sup>7</sup>*

In other words, we have already become posthuman through the discourse of cybernetics; it is now a matter of seizing the moment by taking advantage of posthumanism's benefits and setting the parameters

and limitations for its liabilities. This conception of the posthuman as an opportunity explains that we have already marched partially down the path and have already experienced our personhood as compromised; if we fully embrace this notion rather than resisting it, we will open ourselves up to a generally inclusive and theoretically sound worldview. Of the various discussions of posthumanism, Hayles' is the most appealing because, although it is romantic in its own way, escapes romanticism by correctly noting its material origins. And though Hayles does not go back far enough, it is along these lines that I would like to proceed.

Though Percy Bysshe Shelley is hardly the first to complain about the relentless progress of capitalism, and though his language is occasionally loathsome to contemporary critics, myself included, who prefer the proprietary language which has been invented in the last decade or so, it is hard not to see the relentless process of taking the sweetness of art and transforming it through market devices. Anticipating McKenzie Wark's discussion of the Hacker class and the Vectoralist class by nearly 200 years (and Marx by a couple decades), Shelley writes:

*Undoubtedly the promoters of utility, in this limited sense, have their appointed office in society. They follow the footsteps of poets, and copy the sketches of their creations into the book of common life. They make space, and give time. Their exertions are of the highest value so long as they confine their administration of the concerns of the inferior powers of our nature within the limits due to the superior ones. But whilst the sceptic destroys gross superstitions, let him spare to deface, as some of the French writers have defaced, the eternal truths character'd upon the imaginations of men. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines labour, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want. They have exemplified the saying, "To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away." The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty. <sup>8</sup>*

To be fair, Wark's *Hacker Manifesto* is quite self-consciously positioned within the history of this debate, and his renewed focus on capitalism is utterly necessary in that it poses the same questions to the so-called new economy. <sup>9</sup> Where Shelley is useful, here, is not in his critique of capitalism, rather his text is a thread which connects the poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the poet of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century vis-à-vis a developing capitalism.

If we look at the development of capitalism, we can leap off of Hayles and ask the question: If posthumanism is a product of the capitalism of the postwar period, might we trace its origins back further through the history of capitalism? It is doubtful that the critics of capitalism were inspired simply by an academic desire to calculate the values for things by different formulae. It is logical to believe, and Shelley affirms this, that critics were concerned with what capitalism was doing to people. If relationships can be said to be

"personal," capitalism introduces an "impersonal" technique. If the good things in human life are art, love, and friendship, capitalism is an empirically codified system of alternate priorities. It isn't necessarily fashionable to do so, but I am inclined to argue that posthumanism did not begin with those disenchanting by Modernism; it began with the ritualized disenchantment of industrial capitalism. It can be tracked to the moment when human agency was displaced in favor of a philosophy of order that led from the industrial revolution towards globalization, corporate personhood, and the triumph of technocentric culture.

If we see this, then Shelley's critique has much to offer contemporary critics seeking to understand electronic literature.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the utopian possibility is embodied in the posthuman potential of the "Body without Organs":

*You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, "So what is this BwO?" But you're already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic; desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight - fight and are fought - seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love... The BwO: it is already under way the moment the body has had enough of organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them. <sup>10</sup>*

Sloughing off the coherence of the bounded consciousness of the Enlightenment subject, the Body without Organs is nomadic subjectivity; radically open to the meanderings of our awareness. Current custom would suggest that we situate this sentiment within the "posthuman," yet the differences between

Shelley's "humanist" intent and Deleuze and Guattari's alleged "posthumanism" might not be so far apart. Poetry, as Shelley defines it, is not simply a particular form of literary writing, rather poetry exists in all of those writings which seek to elevate human virtue, the chief of which is "Love: or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own."<sup>11</sup> But before we reject such talk as outdated nonsense, we would do well to reflect upon this passage in light of recent criticism, which makes an uncannily similar point. According to Alain Badiou, love (which he distinguishes from simple desire or submission) is the process through which "the Two" experience "disjunction" in its very "unicity."<sup>12</sup> In other words, Badiou's love is the union between two people by which their difference is experienced as a truth. Reflecting back on Shelley, poetry is a chief means by which readers can encounter this process of love that is an interpersonal unity experienced precisely through the knowledge of that which exists outside of the self. It disrupts the narcissistic tendency of the Self, validates the subject position of the Other, and establishes between the two a relationship which is marked by the truth of this event.

Taking another note from Deleuze and Guattari, poetry seeks to do more than simply to improve moral relations between the individual and society. The poem provides a deeper experience of potentiality. Shelley explains, "All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially."<sup>13</sup> It is also indeterminate in character: "Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed."<sup>14</sup> It is radical: "Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it."<sup>15</sup> If we guard ourselves against the simplistic equation of love with desire, holding Deleuze and Guattari's excessive description of subjectivity to Badiou's rigorous defini-

tion of love, Shelley's humane mission is shockingly relevant in today's critical milieu.

The key difference is that Shelley seems to understand one thing that many contemporary theorists seem reluctant to admit: Poetry exists to preserve what is human. Not as an appeal to tradition, but as a commitment to love.

So serious is this crisis, that Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," if it is read at all, does not need to be preceded, as it was in its day, in order to be grasped. Shelley's "Defence," initially appeared as a rejoinder to Thomas Love Peacock's satirical essay "The Four Ages of Poetry," which, to paraphrase, suggested that since there were already a bunch of good poems, poets should spend their time in useful service to capitalism. And, given the strange nature of the information economy, service to capitalism can be conceived in the broadest of terms.

So "corrupt" have our "manners" become, so threatened are "the energies which sustain the soul of social life"<sup>16</sup>, that we really need poetry wherever we can find it. So dire is our situation that many critics and poets alike have internalized the spirit of capitalism and embraced "posthumanism," not as a sad consequence of capitalism, but as an ideology to be embraced, that the arts have surely suffered. As with "postfeminist," "postracial," and "post-marxist" ideologies, which have declared gender, race, and social class prematurely, passé, posthumanism has attempted to subject humanism to the same fate. I cannot help but imagine that our literature and art have suffered as a consequence of this new ethos.

My purpose is not to quibble over semantics. If one prefers one term to another, it is of little consequence. The key, however, is to view poetry through its proper framework. This proper framework need not be con-

ceived of in essential or absolute terms, for what I am after is not something that can be empirically known, after all. Rather, I have benefited in my reading of electronic literature by looking back to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," not as some academic exercise, but because poetry needs to be defended, and too few are willing to issue such a defense today. If more people thought of poetry in these terms, perhaps we would make better art (or maybe we would make art better). Maybe poets would be better poets, or maybe readers would be better readers. In the face of improved efficiency, it is nice to look forward to, as much as a post-historical person can be reasonably expected to look forward to anything, the possibility that an excess of communication, an experience of authentic humanity, might shatter the utility of the interface and leave me looking into the soul of another person.

Even if none of these things are true, I need to believe, as I sit in front of my computer, that poetry in any form is a sword of lightning, which consumes whatever tries to contain it. ■

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