TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

Nagoya University

David Thomas Henry Wright

Archival Versos: Unwritten, Unread, Unreadable, Unwritable

Abstract:

A "verso" is the side of a leaf that is to be read second. British conceptual artist Cornelia Parker uses the term in her practice to show the deconstruction of everyday objects, and how "even the most insignificant things can trigger a deeper meaning" (2016). This paper uses a Calvino-inspired creativecritical approach toward archival research to explore potential "versos" in archived text. It explores this from four viewpoints: the unwritten, unread, unreadable and unwritable. This exploration is founded on a claim by Italo Calvino: "We write to give the unwritten world a chance to express itself through us" (1983). From the unwritten, this paper moves to the unread as embodied by "unreadable" programming language as verso in digital writing. The final aspects – "unreadable" and "unwritable" – focus on my attempts to read Georges Perec's materials at the UQ Fryer Library. In August 1981, Perec was writer-in-residence in the French Department, during which he intended to write a novel in fifty-three days, titled 53 Days. My first attempt to read the materials found them "missing". When located, the notes on offer were not sufficient to comprehend Perec's proposed unfinished project. I therefore use "unreadable" programming language to program poetry from Perec's archival remains to explore digital methodological approaches to contemporary creative writing.

Biographical note:

David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' QUT Digital Literature Prize and 2019 Robert Coover Award for a work of Electronic Literature (2nd prize). He has been shortlisted for multiple national and international literary prizes and published in various academic and creative journals. He has a PhD (English and Comparative Literature) from Murdoch University, a Masters (Creative Writing) from The University of Edinburgh, and has been a lecturer at Tsinghua and Nagoya Universities. He is currently co-editor of *The Digital Review* and Associate Professor (Digital Culture) at the University of Bergen in Norway.

Keywords:

Archival studies, Cornelia Parker, electronic literature, versos

I. Unwritten Language

New York University, New York City, 1983. Visiting lecturer Italian author Italo Calvino, before NYU staff and students, in fervent, clipped English:

> We write to give the unwritten world a chance to express itself through us. Yet the moment my attention wanders from the set order of the written lines to the moveable complexity no sentence is able to hold entirely, I come close to understanding that on the other side of the words there is something words could mean. Poets and writers we admire have built up in their works a world we feel as the most meaningful – opposing it to a world they too felt lacking in meaning and in perspective. Believing that their gesture was not too different from ours, we raise our eyes from the page to look into darkness. (Calvino, 1983)

Calvino's lecture and Q&A session were recorded on cassette tape. On September 11, 2016, the tape was digitised to an audio CD that I listened to at the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library. I was also provided with Calvino's correspondence with New York University, where he attempted to negotiate increased payment for saying the above words; he was paid a total of $4500 for a series of seminars, in addition to free accommodation at the university and subsidized airline travel from Italy. Calvino also attempted to gain a ticket for his wife, but it is unclear if he was successful in doing so. I visited the Bobst Library on a research grant. My purpose was to investigate new methods of writing that would be appropriate for the contemporary age.

As I was listening to Calvino's recorded voice, a few blocks away Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton fainted at the 9/11 memorial service, a result of pneumonia and dehydration. This was only weeks before her defeat to Republican candidate Donald Trump. At the time, polls indicated Clinton would surely be victorious, but as many statisticians have attempted to elucidate, polling numbers are not the most effective tea leaves; data does not easily translate into meaningful human language. As I sit writing this paper today, Trump is the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

In the years that followed, global communication seems to have been revised. The Trump/COVID era became a world of attitudes, visuals, dislocated lexias and incessant irony. Back in 1983, Calvino was asked by NYU academics about French master novelist Gustave Flaubert's lack of anxiety about language, despite his obvious pedantry for words and obsession with the *mot juste*. Calvino replied:

> French writers deal with a reality which is the French language. They are sure there is a language which is *the* language. In Italy, we always have to program the language. We cannot believe that Italian is *the* language. (Calvino, 1983)

At the end of Calvino's Q&A, many American-accented voices muttered "grashias" [sic], before conducting English conversations over wine and cheese. A snippet suggests there was

also salami. Some youthful-sounding voices, proximate to the recording device, discussed whether or not they relished becoming drunk on free wine, their enthusiasm for *The Velvet Underground* and marijuana, and other chitchat. Conversations crescendoed and decrescendoed as they moved in and out of the recording device's range. After approximately ten minutes into this involuntary time capsule, one voice queried, "Wait, has that been recording this whole time?"

Libraries and cities are full of tiny mysteries such as this: secrets you're certain only you have stumbled upon. Listening to this polyphonic, fragmented, NYC 1983 babble conjured a scene I know well: academics making highbrow witticisms and references, boasts masquerading as anecdotes, a networking frenzy. Yet like Calvino's predicament regarding what he calls the "unwritten" world, duplicating the words using textual language fails to reflect the imprecise echo the recording provides of a real event. These ghosts of 1983 use language, morsels of which can be transcribed, but the gestures and postures, the overlapping voices and interruptions, the power dynamics that are clearly at play… the immediacy of the circumstance is not contained in the recording, remains unwritten as language.

If one reads transcripts of now former (and potentially future) President Donald Trump's rally speeches or interviews, such as this one from July 2015 as transcribed by Tara Golshan in "Donald Trump's unique speaking style, explained by linguists", one is similarly at a loss:

> Look, having nuclear – my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, okay, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart – you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, okay, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world – it's true! – but when you're a conservative Republican they try – oh, do they do a number – that's why I always start off: *Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune* – you know I have to give my like credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged – but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me – it would have been so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are (nuclear is powerful; my uncle explained that to me many, many years ago, the power and that was 35 years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right – who would have thought?), but when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners – now it used to be three, now it's four – but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it's gonna take them about another 150 years – but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so, and they, they just killed, they just killed us. (Trump in Golshan, 2016)

The words themselves are from the English language. Most would be acceptable in a game of *Scrabble*. Yet as cohesive language, it is too digressive on the page. It makes the paragraphless, monophonic style of Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard seem orderly. In "reading" Trump's language, one requires the mannerisms, the inflections, the crowd response; one requires the YouTube video. It is naïve to say that the language produced by Trump is meaningless. It has

meaning. It is simply a meaning that cannot be captured effectively by English language on a page as text.

It was around this point in time, in 2016, that I began to question if English is *the* language. The age of European languages seemed in decline. Flaubert's ideal of precision seemed further away than ever. Despite its vast vocabulary, malleability and capacity for transcendence, my language felt limited. Perhaps, I thought, taking a cue from Calvino's "programmed" Italian, English also needed to be programmed.

II. Unread Language

From late 2019 to early 2020, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney presented a retrospective of British visual artist/sculptor Cornelia Parker OBE, RA. One section of her exhibit, titled *Versos*, contained photographs of the reverse side of button samplers: a mysterious, subconscious language made by those who sewed buttons onto cards. For this work Parker photographed:

> the underside of cards used to display buttons from a museum collection. Parker uncovers the patterns created by the workers whose hands had sewn the buttons onto the cards many decades before. A repetitive mundane task has produced unconsciously abstractions on the underside of the card. As each card's original function was to be a backdrop to an array of goods, the backs therefore are free to evoke the opposite meaning. (MutualArt, 2024, para. 3)

Behind the mass-production of buttons lie unique choices made by human individuals. A "verso" is the side of a leaf that is to be read second. Parker uses the term in her practice to show the deconstruction of everyday objects, and how "even the most insignificant things can trigger a deeper meaning" (2016).

Alongside *Versos*, Parker's 2015 work *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* was exhibited. Created to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, Parker's embroidered representation depicts the English language *Wikipedia* article as it appeared on June 15, 2014. For this hand-stitched work, approximately two hundred people were invited to participate. These include: *Wikileaks* founder Julian Assange, who stitched "freedom"; Labour Party politician and human rights activist Shami Chakrabarti, who stitched "Charter of Liberties"; musician and *Pulp* band member Jarvis Cocker, who stitched "common people"; Igor Judge, Baron Judge and Lady Judith Judge, who stitched "Habeas Corpus"; artist and President of the Royal Academy of Arts Christopher Le Brun, who stitched "folio"; Doreen Delceita Lawrence, mother of racially murdered Stephen Lawrence, who stitched "justice", "denial" and "delay"; novelist Philip Pullman, who stitched "Oxford"; member of the House of Lords Sayeedi Warsi, who stitched the word "freedom"; former editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* Alan Charles Rusbridger, who stitched "contemporary political relevance"; co-founder of *Wikipedia* Jimmy Wales, who

stitched “user’s manual”; and Parker herself, who stitched “prerogative”. Additionally, much of the embroidery was completed by prisoners from various jails across England. The work was encased in glass. Mirrors underneath displayed the underside of the stitching – the *verso* – showing the hundreds of individual choices made by the hundreds who cross-stitched the tapestry.

My attendance at this exhibit was not planned. I had been at a literary conference for the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, talking about the inadequacy of non-digital language. I had also been drinking the night prior, celebrating a professional achievement. Despite my best efforts to program my phone to discontinue my natural inclination to sleep, I ignored its chimes and missed my flight out of Sydney. My head felt like Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991): an installation work that suspends the restored contents of a garden shed exploded by the British Army at Parker’s request.

Friends had dragged me to the Parker exhibit, where I stood, staring at the *verso* of *Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* for some time. While Parker displayed the *verso* of the tapestry, she did not display the *verso* of the programming language: the code which set *Wikipedia*, as it was on June 15, 2014. These layers of language Parker had not included: the hypertext mark-up language, the cascading style sheets and scripts, the non-human orders for computers to follow. It’s fashionable to say computers are just made up of 1s and 0s, but for humans to communicate with them we need programming languages. In her lecture “Straight Quotes, Square Brackets”, Canadian digital artist J.R. Carpenter asserts:

> All digital writing operates in between spaces. Between the server and the client’s device. Between the source code and the output. Between human languages and machine languages … It operates in the ‘there’ of the server and the ‘here’ of the device and the ‘if’ of the source code and the ‘then’ of what’s presented on screen. A text displayed on a computer screen is always already a text in translation. (Carpenter, 2021, para. 6)

From Alan Turing’s 1936 paper *On Computable Numbers*, to the microcomputer revolution in the 1970s, to the omnipresence of smartphones today, programming languages have grown exponentially. The majority of these languages are Eurocentric, using English syntax. Dozens of non-English-based programming languages exist, in everything from Amharic to Yoruba, but these are largely for educational purposes. Generally speaking, if you want to use code, you need to know some English.

Or perhaps not. One could, hypothetically, simply understand the basic abstract functions of the language to a computer, without understanding its actual meaning as human language. And with the development of AI generative programs, one can simply have the computer code itself. Since my trip to the Bobst Library in 2016, I was inspired to produce a number of works of electronic literature: the digital epistolary novel *Paige & Powe* (2017), the recombinant Faulkner-inspired digital novel *Little Emperor Syndrome* (2018), and the data-determined, 3D-printed *The Data Souls* (2019). My practice combines literary text and computer code: human

and non-human language. Works of electronic literature depend on computers to exist. This is not the future of writing, it is the present, as nearly all text exists on a computer first (exceptions include bathroom graffiti and vanity presses). While many readers express a sensual fondness for the texture of paper, or the faint vanilla smell of old books caused by the breakdown of volatile organic compounds, or flaunting hefty tomes on one's bookcase in a fashion similar to a game hunter hanging a moose head above a fireplace, this is merely a nostalgic pleasure. As Californian media theorist Jessica Pressman (2009) argues, the aesthetic of "bookishness" is now fetishised:

> This focus on and fetishization of the book-bound nature of the codex as reading object has, in some respects, always been the case for certain strains of literature. (Pressman, 2009)

For the time being, the reading public remains relatively "kinky". The contemporary reader remains obsessed with the book. Writing and publishing software remains bordered in, not a bookishness, but a scrollishness. The Microsoft Word file I type this into flows down indefinitely, like an ancient scroll or a roll of toilet paper (the latter simile is appropriate for the ineptitude of Microsoft Word as publishing software).

I am still new to digital writing and possibilities. My use of computer languages is primitive. Often I know what I want the digital text to do, but do not know how to go about it. My collaboration with the machine is routinely frustrating. I frequently feel like a toddler, trying out goos and gaas before throwing a tantrum, demanding the machine give in to my whims. I tinker with code through an ineffective process of trial and error. The computer shrugs, indifferent, unable to assist this foreigner who has dared invade the digital environment. I search for answers from colleagues and the Internet. My working method, competent programmers will tell you, is bad practice. When and if it finally works, I feel relief, but rarely clarity, not unlike Nigel Richards, a Christchurch native who won the French-language *Scrabble* world championship simply by memorising a French dictionary and implementing good strategy. Richards still cannot speak French. Similarly, a non-English-speaking-yet-experienced programmer would likely understand how my code talks to the computer better than I do. The code's relationship to the European language that underpins it is irrelevant. While humans can "read" code, we do not *read* code the way computers do. It is not for us. Computer languages are non-animal languages. These gigantic *versos* that outweigh actual contemporary human text production and dictate so much of our lives – that organise contemporary engagement with so much social and political discourse, a leading force in European elections, Brexit decisions, global leadership determinations – are largely ignored by the majority of their benefactors. Often even their authors.

II. Unreadable Language

The OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or "workshop of potential literature") is a group of predominantly French authors and mathematicians, who in response to the unbridled freedom of the surrealists, sought to write using constraint. In 1969, French author and OuLiPo member Georges Perec wrote *La Disparition* (*A Void*), a 300-page novel written entirely without the letter "e". Perec lost both his parents in World War II: his father died as a soldier and his mother in the Holocaust. The constrained writing liberated Perec to write about this difficult subject; the absence of the letter "e" was a means to address the absence of his own parents (Rettberg, 2020). Matthews (1997) asserts that through constraint, "we find ourselves doing and saying things we never would have otherwise, that turn out to be exactly what we need to reach our goal". This, Rettberg (2020) argues, is the reason Perec adopted this particular constraint, as he "wanted to write about his parents' disappearance during the Holocaust, but it was too emotionally close to him for him to be able to write effectively about it, until he focused on this constraint of not using the letter E" (p. 33). Similarly, Perec's 1978 novel, *La Vie mode d'emploi* (*Life: A User's Manual*) is a cross-section of a fictitious Parisian apartment building: 11 rue Simone-Crubellier. Italo Calvino regarded this as the "last real 'event' in the history of the novel" (1988, p. 121). The building is a 10x10 grid, slightly smaller than the 15x15 of a *Scrabble* board. Each room is assigned a chapter in Perec's story. The novel, however, contains only ninety-nine chapters. One of the rooms is "locked". This is because, Calvino argues, Perec's ultra-completed book has an intentional loophole for incompleteness.

At the end of August 1981, Perec spent one month as writer-in-residence in the French Department of the University of Queensland (UQ). While in Australia, he intended to write a novel in fifty-three days, titled *53 Days*. This novel was never finished. Perec died four months later in Paris. According to Peter Salmon's 2016 review of Perec's posthumously-published unfinished book, days before he died, a UQ student bumped into a haggard Perec, who said, "C'est l'Australie qui m'a foutu mal": *Australia fucked me up.*

In late 2019, I attempted to read these notes and pursue Perec's final plans, to find that elusive way to write in and for the contemporary. I was informed by the UQ librarian via email, "We are … having trouble locating the Georges Perec material". When I arrived to study the archival sources, the Perec materials were absent. "We can't find them," said the librarian. Perec, an author whose work stressed the inclusion of absence in works like *A Void*, whose final unfinished novel was never completed… well, his notes were nowhere to be found. Perhaps lost in the archive forever.

I did not know how to express my disappointment or how to reference this absence. But I feel Perec likely has a system to include this absence of his own work's absence about his own unfinished work. The unreadable notes of the unwritten work. Absence d'absence d'absence d'absence.

IV. Unwritable Language

In February of 2020, I received word from UQ's Fryer Library that the material had been located. I felt as if the "locked" room in *La Vie mode d'emploi* had been opened for me to explore. I attended the library, received the document wallet, put my bag in the locker, sat down at the wide table and perused the material:

1) A translated reprint of *Still Life/Style Leaf*, which observes, in pedantic detail, the author's writing space, before describing the writer's page, which contains the very same observations. Loose pages affixed with a paperclip.

2) *Alphabet pour Stämpfli* written in black pen. The piece ends with the word *XZZZO*. Searching this term online directs to a streaming account of an individual that plays the video game *League of Legends*.

3) Proofs of *La Cloture*. Page 31 reads:

   DIRE
   VENT ATONE
   RECOIN
   A DÉSIGNER
   FÉES & OMBRES
   DÉRIVE
   REEL GOURD

É is crossed out with pencil and an E marked in the left margin.

4) *"Scrabble" Patterns*. Twelve eight-line stanzas, using the letters E, S, A, R, T, I, N, U, L, O, C, M, P, G, D, plus a "joker".

5) *Epithalame*, a pamphlet folded into nine segments.

6) A collection of unlabelled, handwritten black and blue notes on grid paper: poems written using only certain letters displayed at the top. "EIOU DNR" is scrawled on top of the second page.

7) A translated, reprinted copy of Experimental Demonstration of the Tomatotopic Organization in the Soprano (Cantatrix sopranica L.)*, first published in Banana-Split No.2 (Juin 1980).

8) An unsent postcard, which contains Perec's name and the words:

   Ouvre ces serrures caverneuses

> Avance vers ces œuvres rares:
> Une encre ocre creuse son cerne
> Sous sa morsure azur – aucun
> Ressac ne navre encore ces aurores

Rough translation by me:

> Open those cavernous locks
> Advance towards these rare works:
> Ochre ink digs into the ring
> Under his azure bite – none
> Surf still doesn't grieve

9) A French poster for a lecture by Perec on June 18, 1980. Printed on yellow card.

10) An A4 photocopy of the poem RAIL.

11) Draft material for Chapter 50 of *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Contains sketches of men with beards in green and black pen, and a reference to *epruche a chateau*… Castle parakeet?

12) Three photographs. One of OuLiPo, 1975: standing are Jacques Roubaud, Paul Fournel, Michèle Métail, Luc Etienne, Georges Perec, Marcel Bénabou, Jacques Bens, Paul Braffort, Jean Lescure (filming), Jacques Duchateau, Noël Arnaud; seated are Italo Calvino, Harry Mathews, François Le Lionnais, Raymond Queneau, Jean Queval, Claude Berge; and on the table is André Blavier. The two other photographs are of Perec. One is a headshot, and the other is of him with a cat on his shoulder that is attempting to climb out the window.

To one side, my laptop was open and glowing. I had typed:

> A translated reprint of Still Life/Style Leaf, which observes, in pedantic detail, the author's writing space, before describing the writer's page, which contains the very same observations. Loose pages affixed with a paperclip.
>
> Alphabet pour Stämpfli written in black pen. The piece ends with the word XZZZO. Searching this term online directs to a streaming account of an individual that plays the video game League of Legends.
>
> Proofs of La Cloture. etc., etc.

The Fryer Library's assortment of documents, works and photographs was not the treasure map to textual clarity I had hoped for. I lamented the lack of notes surrounding Perec's time in Brisbane. Likewise, the absence of his final plans for *53 Days*. These notes were elsewhere, in other archives in other countries, or else inaccessible or non-existent.

V. Creative Archival Practice

So instead, in an attempt to write for the (now lost) contemporary I decided to let OuLiPo constraints help free meaning from these chaotically archived times. From Perec's *"Scrabble" Patterns*, I took the letters E, S, A, R, T, I, N, U, L, O, C, M, P, G, D and a "joker". But instead of the free letter of the *Scrabble* board, I will use British author Salman Rushdie's joker. In Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* (2017) there is a character who is a corrupt billionaire, who has a young Eastern European wife and enjoys having his name on buildings. When asked why he chose to name the character "the joker", Rushdie explained, "in a deck of playing cards there's only two cards that are unusual to play. One of them is the Trump, and the other is the Joker" (in Keeble, 2019). Perec's *"Scrabble" Patterns* letters will form a French *verso*, which will be used to delimit the vocabulary used in the former United States President's 2020 State of the Union speech, which in turn will be added to a Javascript poetry generator to conjure a form of writing for the contemporary. None of this will actually be "written" by me, but simply human-edited here and there. My concern is not that it won't make sense, but that it will make more sense than the 2020 State of the Union. It will also be offered in digitally-translated French, because I have a sneaking suspicion that it is *the* language, even if only provided by Google Translate and with the letters B, F, H, J, K, Q, V, W, X, Y, and Z removed.

So here goes:

State o_ t_e Union	*État de l'Union*
Our out-armed sir,	*Notre monsieur armé,*
America's again criminal,	*l'Améri_ue est à nou_eau criminelle,*
a poisonous medal upon	*une médaille empoisonnée sur*
a permanent Truman going against promise.	*un Truman permanent allant à l'encontre de la promesse.*
A record-setting narcotic eliminated under range	*Un stupé_iant record _attu sous la gamme*
coordinating around/against troops.	*coordination autour / contre les troupes.*
Pro-American gas got its pipeline.	*Le ga_ pro-américain a o_tenu son pipeline.*
Nuclear terror comes on opioids.	*La terreur nucléaire _ient des opioïdes.*

Islamic America struggles against nature.
Proud plan, called so under a Palestinian.
Gruesome progress stamped around
premature oil supporting matter.

L'Améri_ue islami_ue lutte contre la nature.
Plan _ier, appelé ainsi par un Palestinien.
Des progrès _orri_les mar_ués
matière de support d'_uile prématurée.

Diplomatic attempts sound.
Guatemala increases during sanctions;
important Nicaraguans getting miles.
A greater religion is dreamed among Asian-Americans.

Des tentati_es diplomati_ues sonnent.
Le Guatemala augmente pendant les sanctions;
les Nicaragua_ens importants gagnent des miles.
Une religion plus grande est rê_ée parmi les Américains d'origine asiati_ue.

Dangerous pilgrims' prosperous spree upon a regardless railroad,
unparalleled premiums pledging a mission,
a radical masterpiece among optimism,
a gruesome people rising across decades.

La _olie prospère des pèlerins dangereu_ sur un c_emin de _er indépendant,
des primes inégalées promettant une mission,
un c_e_-d'œu_re radical parmi l'optimisme,
un peuple _orri_le s'éle_ant à tra_ers des décennies.

Great dreams terminate later generations.

Les grands rê_es mettent _in au_ générations ultérieures.

Just as Matthews (1997) argues that such constraints allow for new creative possibilities, so here do these constraints allow me to navigate the word salad that is former U.S. President Trump's rhetoric. As a political poem, I feel myself relatively powerless scripting a "traditional" poem that broaches this topic. Even in very caustic and astringent writers, such as Chilean author Roberto Bolaño, one feels powerless as a political writer to effectively articulate one's anger. This constraint allows me to do so. There is also a flicker of power in turning one's own words against them. In 2020 I had a poem published in *Westerly* titled *[The future of the humanities in Australia] or; On {On Generosity, National Press Club address}* (Wright, 2020). It was a political response to the Minister for Education Dan Tehan's National Press Club address on June 19, 2020 that informed that student contributions for Humanities degrees will increase by 113 per cent. It combined information technology and foreign language skills, or the skills Tehan claimed were more valuable to society than the humanities, particularly the creative arts. I used these skills to generate a poem using a Javascript poetry generator inputted with the vocabulary from the translated essay "On Generosity" ("Sur La Générosité", 1686/7) by German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Tehan's own words. Technically speaking, I did not "write" any of the poem. The opening stanza –

> A microcredential participation misalignment
> veiled heavenly within the economy,
> itself without origin,
> safely above providence.

– encapsulates precisely how angry and helpless I felt at the time. And yet, there is no way in the world I would ever have written it without a computer's assistance. At times I am not certain if the poem is even mine at all, if my process even makes me "the writer".

VI. Conclusion

Digital or electronic literature has been around since the 1950s (Flores, 2019). Currently, in Australia, many literary prizes offer awards for "digital literature". Yet it remains unclear what these award bodies mean by "digital". This remains a source of great frustration to Australian practitioners in this field, who constantly have to defend what it is they are doing. This is despite numerous internationally-recognised Australian practitioners who have helped define the field, such as Hazel Smith, Roger Dean, Jason Nelson, Mez Breeze and the late Ross Gibson. In "Still Defining Digital Literature" (2018), Simon Groth writes:

> There we were in 2017, still futzing around with definitions. This can be a source of frustration, especially when you consider it appears to be a problem peculiar to [digital literature]. The chair of the children's book panel, for example, does not need to clarify what a book is, or for that matter what a child is. (Groth, 2018)

There is a great digital illiteracy. And this goes beyond media studies and information technology.

In 2022, OpenAI promoted ChatGPT, an AI program capable of writing answers to prompts from users. The effectiveness of these programs to coherently convey a respectable response has caused a panic by education bodies and authors. YA Australian author Holden Sheppard writes: “There's a whole bunch of really angry authors who are really mad that our work has been pirated and fed through these AI algorithms, and then spit out the other side” (Sheppard in Wynne, 2023). Sheppard’s comments were in response to Prosecraft.io, which has since been taken down. Creator Benji Smith offered the following explanation for this decision:

> Today, I’m taking down the prosecraft.io website, which had previously been dedicated to the linguistic analysis of literature, including more than 25,000 books by thousands of different authors … I originally started working on this project more than ten years ago, when I began writing a memoir about a difficult time in my life. It was my first book, and I didn’t know how many words I should write. I had heard that “real books” should be about 100,000 words. I searched the internet for more specific guidance but I didn’t find much … So I pulled a few paperbacks off of my own shelves — books by authors I admired — and counted by hand how many words were on the first few pages. Then I counted the total number of pages, and multiplied the two numbers to get an estimate … I wanted to give those budding storytellers a suite of “lexicographic” tools that they could use, to compare their own writing with the writing of authors they admire. I’ve been working in the field of computational linguistics and machine learning for 20+ years, and I was always frustrated that the fancy tools were only accessible to big businesses and government spy agencies. I wanted to bring that magic to everyone … I researched copyright laws, mindful of not wanting to hurt or offend the community of authors that I cared so much about. Since I was only publishing summary statistics, and small snippets from the text of those books, I believed I was honoring the spirit of the Fair Use doctrine, which doesn’t require the consent of the original author. (Smith, 2023)

Despite these recent gripes, the analysis of literary texts utilising the digital humanities has been around for some time. Notably, Nobel Prize winning author J.M. Coetzee produced a dissertation that analysed Samuel Beckett’s works through digital means (2022). Perhaps more problematic, is *How It Is in Common Tongues* (2012), which was produced through Daniel Howe and John Cayley’s *The Readers Project*, “a collection of distributed, performative, quasi-autonomous poetic ‘readers’ — active, procedural entities with distinct reading behaviours and strategies” (2013). According to the authors:

> How It Is in Common Tongues was composed by searching for the text of Samuel Beckett’s How It Is using a universally accessible search engine, attempting to find, in sequence, the longest common phrases from How It Is that were composed by writers or writing machines other than Beckett. These phrases are quoted from a portion of the commons of language that happens to have been indexed by a universally accessible engine. (Howe & Cayley, 2013)

Nick Montfort labelled the book a "radical book of 2012" (in Howe & Cayley, 2013). The work is somewhat conceptual, and Howe and Cayley certainly do not suggest that this is a practical matter to combat copyright in future, but between Sheppard's accusations, Smith's apologies, and Cayley and Howe's experiments, lies a digital illiteracy that makes it difficult to engage the broader literary community. The concerns are real and varied. Putting aside plagiarism and education concerns, the real trauma experienced by Kenyan workers paid less that $2 an hour to scour material in an attempt to make it "less toxic" (Perrigo, 2023) is just one of the hidden forces behind these modes of textual production. If one asks ChatGPT to provide the underlying code, it can provide no answer. The verso of these texts and modes of text production remain elusive. The deeper rooted fear is that we may no longer be able to see the verso. Only the surface text.

References

Calvino, I. (1983). Archive Materials, RG37-4_ref2500_000001, Access 7:14, Elmer Bobst Library, New York University, New York.

Calvino, I. (1988). *Six memos for the next millennium*. Vintage.

Carpenter, J. R. (2021). Straight quotes, square brackets: Page-based poetics inflected with the syntax and grammar of code languages, *hybrid,* 7, n. pag. https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.684

Farrant, M. (2022). A Poetics of Embeddness: J.M. Coetzee's Dissertation on Beckett, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *68*(3), 323–352.

Flores, L. (2019). Third Generation Electronic Literature, *Electronic Book Review*. https://doi.org/10.7273/axyj-3574

Goldshan, T. (2016). Donald Trump's strange speaking style, as explained by linguists: Is Donald Trump a throwback to ancient oratory – or an undisciplined rambler?, *Vox*. vox.com/2016/8/18/12423688/donald-trump-speech-style-explained-by-linguists

Groth, S. (2018). Still Defining Digital Literature, *The Writing Platform*. https://thewritingplatform.com/2018/05/still-defining-digital-literature/

Howe, D.C., & Cayley, J. (2013). Reading, Writing, Resisting: Literary Appropriation in the Readers Project. In *Proceedings of the 19th International Symposium of Electronic Art*, ISEA2013. University of Sydney, Australia. http://hdl.handle.net/2123/9708

Jones, J. (2015). Kings and needles: the Magna Carta gets an embroidery update, *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/may/14/magna-carta-an-embroidery-cornelia-parker-british-library-wikipedia-prisoners-jarvis-cocker

Keeble, H. (2019). Rushdie and "the Joker", *The Orbital*. https://theorbital.co.uk/rushdie-and-the-joker/

Matthews, H. (1997). Translation in the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese, *Electronic Book Review*. http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/translation-and-the-oulipo-the-case-of-the-persevering-maltese/

Montfort, N. (2012). Radical books of 2012. *Post Position.* https://nickm.com/post/2013/01/radical-books-of-2012-2/

MutualArt. (2024). Cornelia Parker: Verso. *MutualArt*. https://www.mutualart.com/Exhibition/Cornelia-Parker--Verso/FF5A97D73476EF3A

Parker, C. (2016). *Verso*. Ivory Press. https://www.ivorypress.com/en/art/cornelia-parker-verso/

Perec, G. (1969) *A Void*. Gallimard.

– – –. (1978). *Life: A User's Manual*. Hachette Littératures.

Perrigo, B. (2023). Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than $2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic, *TIME*. https://time.com/6247678/openai-chatgpt-kenya-workers/

Pressman, J. (2009). Bookishness: The New Fate of Reading in the Digital Age. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *xlviii*(4), n. pag.

Pressman, J. (2020). *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*. Columbia University Press.

Rettberg, S. (2020). Teaching Electronic Literature Using Electronic Literature. Transcript of the Keynote Lecture at the closing remarks of the Teaching Digital Literature International Conference (TDLIC) 2019. https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/11250/2764081?show=full

Rushdie, S. (2017). *The Golden House*. Jonathan Cape.

Salmon, P. (2015). "53 Days" by Georges Perec: 'C'est l'Australie qui m'a foutu mal!', *Sydney Review of Books*. https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/53-days-georges-perec-review/

Smith, B. (2023). "Taking Down Prosecraft.io". https://blog.shaxpir.com/taking-down-prosecraft-io-37e189797121

The Readers Project (2012) *How It Is in Common Tongues*. https://thereadersproject.org/hiiict2012.html

Wright, D. (2020). [The future of the humanities in Australia] or; On {On Generosity, National Press Club address}, *Westerly*, *65*(2), p. 66.

Wynne, E. (2023). Author Holden Sheppard raises alarm after discovering his work used by writing analysis database, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*. https://abc.net.au/listen/programs/perth-drive/holden-sheppard-online-database-theft/102708340