## Reading and Giving Voice and Language

In an earlier essay, I began to develop

constituted diegesis' (Cayley 2010). I was

a theoretical concept, which was that of 'media-

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concerned with the inscription of language in other media, by which I mean new or unconventional support and delivery media for language. The earlier essay wrestled with immersive, stereo-3D audio-visuality as a 'complex surface' for linguistic inscription. Linguistic performance is, overwhelmingly, embodied in physical media as either articulated sound or as graphical arrangements on a visible surface.<sup>1</sup> Language differs from other artistic media in that, although it must always be supported by physical media, when we consider the ontology of the linguistic artefact (that may be simultaneously proposed as an aesthetic artefact), this artefact cannot be identified with its physical support or delivery media.<sup>2</sup>

This ontological non-identification of linguistic performances and their mediaas-material-embodiment is philosophically fundamental and prior to any questions that we may consider in relation to mediaconstituted diegesis. However, because linguistic practice may also, simultaneously, be aesthetic practice, and due to tendencies in criticism that compare and conflate specific, quite distinct artistic practices - reducing one to another conceptually, or considering them as structurally analogous - the singularity of linguistic practice may become difficult to distinguish. By contrast, my overarching concern is for an expository elaboration of the specificities of language as a medium, particularly in the sense of artistic or aesthetic medium. However, I will here be outlining

analogous circumstances in non-linguistic media, claiming that the human capacity to distinguish diegetic worlds is comparable with our capacity to distinguish readable language. I attempt to show that when we distinguish media-constituted diegesis in non-linguistic practices, this may allow us - literally, if our examples are taken from the domain of graphic visuality - to see how diegetic worlds of significance and affect – as constituted by practices in their media - may distinguish themselves from *differently* constituted diegetic worlds even when they are embodied in the same work and the same *physical* media. A work that we experience or read often presents us with perceptible diegetic breaks, with distinct worlds - juxtaposed, layered and/or intersected - worlds in generative collision and productive collusion. When language is in an embodied world, there is *always* at least one such break.

For human subjects, the notion of 'world' that which is conjured by diegesis - embraces the symbolic: the very symbolic practice and play that engenders narrative and poetics, that constitutes significance per se, and that generates affect as persistent or recurrent symbolized sensation. Sketching out an argument that I will shortly make at somewhat greater length, I propose to show that the kind of diegetic breaks we find within certain aesthetic works are a model for the diegetic breaks that *necessarily* exist, separating all linguistic performance from any media that supply its support and embodiment. Linguistic diegesis, the 'world' that language produces, is always an other world, distinct from any that constitutes its material existence. One reason for this circumstance is that linguistic artefacts

capabilities. It is also conservative: Language finds it difficult to be deployed in other physical media, although in principle this would be possible. Vilém Flusser seemed to propose that linguistic symbolic practice will migrate to the 'technological image (Flusser 2011a, 2011b). Perhaps it is on its way, but very slowly. Natural sign languages are, to my mind, the only instances of commensurate human language systems that are deployed in another physical medium - that of spatialized gesture.

<sup>1</sup> This association with particular physical media

is conventional and a

function of human

<sup>2</sup> One of the best expositions of this position that I know is implicit throughout the work of Derrida and set out fairly clearly in Derrida (2005).

ISSN 1352-8165 print/1469-9990 online © 2013 TAYLOR & FRANCIS - their worlds and diegeses – only exist in so far as they are subject to *readability*.<sup>3</sup> The worlds of language are otherwise indistinguishable from the material media within which they are embodied. Only when language is read(able) can the stories and poetics of its other worlds be perceived as entities capable of actualizing their otherwise virtual significance and affect in ours.

Taken thus far, the argument rehearses and consolidates an analysis of language and media in order to make a point or two concerning the ontology of linguistic performances and artefacts - their correlative dependence on readability. However, this essay attempts to go further. If we accept that there are varieties of linguistic practice in digital media, for which the actual performances of virtual language in these media - the traces generated - are the result of purely or predominantly computational processes, then what is the ontological status of these algorithmically generated performances? I argue that such algorithmic artefacts do not exist as constituents of language. This essay suggests that subsequent human performances of computationally generated linguistic artefacts should be understood as readings that cause virtual linguistic artefacts to exist in actuality and as such: to exist as language. Accepting this strange, singular demand that something physically inscribed by more or less exhaustively understood symbolic processes nonetheless may not yet exist - as the only type of thing it may ever become - will help us that is, writers generally, and digital language artists specifically - to a better appreciation of what our medium is: what language is. This circumstance also suggests an ethics of digital language art practices: Perform human readability, or risk having failed as maker.

Programmable computation has provided human and, perhaps, post-human cultures with a new and expanding domain of virtual – that is, not yet or necessarily actualized – expression. The domain of symbolic practice – including logic, mathematics and even the regularly encoded representation of language – has always been an appreciable part of human experience and thought. In the West, from at least the sixteenth century, an explicit association of human thought and language with 'universal' symbolic practice has been proposed. However, it is only since the postwar advent and proliferation of computational devices – stored-program Turing machines, in both theory and in practical implementation – that inscriptions of symbolic processes have entered the human archive on any scale, and have, more importantly, been provided with the bodies and/or human-prosthetic organs that allow these processes to be an active part of our world.

We call inscriptions of algorithmic process code. Much has been written about the relationship between code and language computer 'languages' and natural languages including by my myself.<sup>4</sup> Without offering here any extended discussion, I take the position that code is not (natural) language, not language as such, and that practices of coding are quite distinct from practices of language. Nonetheless, I also maintain that practices of both code and language are practices of the symbolic, and that code shares language's strange but henceforth - subsequent to the proliferation of programming and programmable devices in human cultures a less singular relationship with materiality and embodiment.

Code may be 'low' or 'high' 'level'. Conventionally - according to the designers and users of computer 'languages' - the higher the level of code, the easier it is for humans to read it, in at least the sense of anticipating and understanding what the code will do.<sup>5</sup> Higher level code, as human-readable artefact, is simply the inscribed record of a specialist language use (a small constituent part of the world of language). In the terms of my present argument, it comes into being as such, as language, as a function, precisely, of this human readability. However, when we consider the proper ontology of code in general - its virtuality, actuality and artefactuality - code comes into existence only as it is run through a computer, a Turing machine, a programmaton (as I would far prefer to designate these devices of ours). This is to say <sup>3</sup> I hope that this usage of 'readability' will become clearer as the essay elaborates. In art practical research, my collaborator, Daniel C. Howe, and I are exploring aspects of readability and the culture of human reading through *The Readers Project*, http:// thereadersproject.org.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, this essay follows on from thinking in Cayley (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Saying that it is 'easier' to read glosses over a wide range of ways in which the 'ease' of this facility may be generated: through choice of reserved words and operators, through the deployment of more familiar syntax, and so forth. <sup>6</sup> I use 'privileged' here to indicate the kind of special and necessary relationship between low level (machine) codes and particular hardware configurations.

that the proper existence of code is a sum of the events and the effects of a privileged symbolic inscription passing through a computer processor: the execution of the program or programs inscribed in the code.<sup>6</sup> The parallelism of this delineation of code's ontology with that of linguistic artefactual ontology is no accident. Both language and code are symbolic phenomena. Language is something that is readable by humans; code is something that is executable by (currently) Turing machines. One may be tempted to write 'readable by machines' as characterizing code ontology, but this would be a metaphoric, anthropocentric usage, disguising and glossing over the fact that most code - especially as it runs - is far from being either readable or executable by humans. It is not, in itself, language.

The situation is complicated by the fact that one possible outcome of the events and effects of code may be the generation of virtual language, the inscription of linguistic artefacts that may be offered up (typically on screen) for potential human reading. The strong position of my current argument is that the ontology of these linguistic artefacts is problematic. Their proper existence is correlative to human cultural engagement and may be subject, in particular, to human performances of reading. The virtual language generated by code *exists as language* only when its readability is experienced and affirmed by one or more humans.

One may object that a relationship with readability is already guaranteed in the case of code-generated virtual language, because its (presumed human) programmers have anticipated potential human reading. This may very well be the case, but I provide two responses. First, I would suggest that when programmers are thoroughly engaged with potential human reading, the generated virtual language will, itself, tend to reflect this engagement and would not, thus, require any prior knowledge of the programmers' active involvement with readability in order to distinguish itself as actual, readable language. In any case – to further respond – we are not, primarily, concerned with such edge cases:

of virtual language generated, effectively, by engaged human writers, using programming as an aspect of their compositional medium. What we need to consider is that we live in what is possibly a transitional era, but one in which virtual linguistic artefacts are being generated on a massive scale, while the motivation for these events and effects of code is far from being fully, comprehensively representative of human culture as reflected, importantly, in its cultures of reading and writing. Rather, the production of these artefacts is driven by the requirement to channel human attention (to advertising) or to facilitate transaction (predominantly commercial), and sometimes also simply for the sake of programmatic, computational novelty.

When I say that code-generated virtual linguistic inscription does not exist as language – that it does not take its place in our world as language – the statement is proposed both philosophically and also as polemic, warning against tendencies – of reading and writing – that threaten to become habits, accustoming us to virtual symbolic practices that are merely a restricted and sociopolitically implicated portion of the full human experience – including the aesthetic experience – of language.

I take it as given that there is now a mass of code-mediated and code-generated virtual linguistic inscription propagated throughout a significant portion of the day-to-day worlds of our experience and interaction. Clearly we need to be able to distinguish and thus to be able to read some part of this seething symbolic morass and so bring it into the world as language per se. This is the point at which it may prove useful to invoke the principles of media-constituted diegesis. Initially, we will take our examples and our model from visuality but we will apply them to the strange and contingent materialities of symbolic events and effects. In brief, we say that code-generated linguistic artefacts and virtual language are juxtaposed, intersected and/or overlaid on the digitally mediated surface of inscription: essentially, the network as we now engage with it and as it is now,

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perhaps, a predominant surface of inscription in the developed world. Language that has the potential to be actualized will appear for us suddenly and catastrophically, or as a function of performance, which is inherently a catastrophic process or event. Language emerges, suddenly, from the chaos of symbolic events and effects in so far as it appears to be readable to us, in so far as it is constituted by the diegetic world of human reading, or in so far as it is, by one or other humans, literally, read. We then immediately perceive it as distinct in terms of its diegesis, in terms of its medium and in terms of its virtual and actualizable symbolic substance. Our acts of perception - or reception if the language is read for us - are suddenly acts of reading that require diegetic distinction in order to proceed, in order to allow certain distinct symbols - interconnected syntactically and semantically - to become a constitutive part of the language we use and the language that also constitutes ourselves in a located culture and in specific practices of human natural language.

Previously, to illustrate and exemplify media-constituted diegesis from the domain of visuality, I turned to the work of John Baldessari (Cayley 2010 p. 210); more specifically, to those many and various 'composite photoworks' of his in which a diegesis of cleanly delineated monochrome geometric forms (often Baldessari's characteristic 'dots') or silhouettes overlay and interact with the distinct and immediately recognizable diegesis of, usually, half-tone photographic naturalism.<sup>7</sup> Both of these instances of media constituted diegesis are quite artificial and contingently determined from the perspective of visuality in human culture: for example, by color process and repertoire in the case of the monochrome flatcolor outline forms; or by focus, depth-of-field, and other effects of light-through-optics, fixed by chemical or digital exposures, in the case of photographic naturalism.

We immediately distinguish the different diegetic worlds in this type of image by Baldessari (fig. 1). We know that these worlds are entirely separate, in terms of media practice, for example, and that they interrelate symbolically as a function of our interpretative visual 'reading' - so as to generate the significance and effect of the work as a whole. My suggestion is that virtual linguistic artefacts distinguish themselves similarly, although from any diegetic world or worlds in relation to which they appear. They make themselves *literally* readable, in a manner that corresponds with the way in which the coloured monochrome silhouettes of the Baldessari make themselves metaphorically. visually 'readable'. In the case of the Baldessari, this allows the entire work to be interpreted in the light of its distinct diegetic interrelations; in the case of virtual linguistic artefacts, this allows the language to exist as such. The analogous relations are particularly neat here, since the silhouettes are 'readable' (how?) as active human subjects radically distinct from the world in which they (appear to? truly?) act.

■ Figure 1. John Baldessari. The Duress Series: Person Climbing Exterior Wall of Tall Building / Person on Ledge of Tall Building / Person on Girders of Unfinished Tall Building, 2003. Digital photographic print with acrylic on Sintra. 60 x 180 inches. Reproduction courtesy of John Baldessari.

<sup>7</sup> These works are referred to and discussed using a range of terms by critics of Baldessari's work. 'Composite photoworks' is from Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*. New York: *Rizzoli*, 1990. See pp. 131 ff. and p. 184. <sup>8</sup> This consideration of virtual linguistic artefacts in a visual field has many fascinating special cases that it is impossible to go into here in any detail. Consider the status of the title on the cover of the (second) book in 2a. It is readable and also, thus, 'language-as-such', but it is also comfortably diegetically part of the image-of-a-book-cover and so does not exemplify the diegetic break that language, I claim, always registers. There are the cases of film titling, of (usually failed) attempts to introduce readable language into film and video, and of subtitles that are 'invisible' despite the fact that they usually also embody a ghastly, tasteless disregard (without evoking the obvious necessary diegetic break between one language and another) for the composition of the cinematic frame. A historian of East Asian art, Robert Harrist, has written about the representation of writing and writing itself, inspiring some of my thinking, in Harrist (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Instances from 'Monoclonal Microphone' were first published, thanks to its editor, Benny Lichtner, with a somewhat extended description of the process in Cayley (2011). This work was built using Processing (http:// processing.org), and the RiTa natural language processing library by Daniel C. Howe (www. rednoise.org/rita). Our next illustration is more directly indicative of the way that virtual language appears, suddenly, catastrophically, as belonging to its own distinct diegetic world. In the following series of figures we encounter the strange, singular distinction between, on the one hand, linguistic artefacts that are depicted or represented visually and, on the other, language as such, coming into being, distinguished from a visual field in contra-distinction to which it appears to be, if anything, 'overlaid', while simultaneously having fully entered into the diegesis of human readability (figs 2a–d).

In Figure 2a, consider the photographic image of the open book. Its pages bear unreadable traces that nonetheless depict linguistic artefacts - we know that they refer, visually, to language, but we cannot read it. It is too small and out of focus, in accordance with the conventional media-constituted world of photographic naturalism. In figure 2b we are closer to reading but our divorce from the world of reading is still in effect. The same applies to figure 2c, although perhaps we now feel we should be able to read. In figure 2d a paragraph has been brought into focus. This is the only graphic alteration to the image. Its graphic traces are, ultimately from the same digital photograph as figure 2c. The visual distinction is trivial but sharp. And yet this is simply a kind of allusion to the much sharper, more radical break - that I characterize as a diegetic break - between virtual linguistic artefactuality and the sudden ontological presence of actual language that we are able to read. This part of the image can never more be simply a *depiction* of language. Its readability causes to it to become language itself.8 We can now, if we wish, perform it as such, and 'give it voice'.

Our next step is to illustrate and examine cases of computationally generated virtual linguistic artefacts, citing, in the first instance, my own intrinsically unfinished sequence 'Monoclonal Microphone'. This poetic experiment in digital language art consists of a large, indeterminate number of potential poems generated by algorithmic processes transacting with Internet search. It arose from a process designed to generate an initial text that subsequently served as the loose template for instances in the open-ended set of potential poems that constitute the work. In the context of this essay, our purpose is to question the ontological status of the mass of virtual linguistic artefacts that have been or could be produced.

The 'first' text of 'Monoclonal Microphone' is the poem-like arrangement of title and nine lines of 'verse' illustrated in the large grey type of Figure 3a. The pseudo-code/constraints that generated this text are as follows. The poem is composed from a two-word title and two-word lines, each one an adjective preceding a singular noun, selected from a digitized lexicon by guasi-random processes.9 Another simple algorithm generated quasi-random couplet- or verse- divisions for the poem-like text based on the occurrence of particular letters in a line. Potential adjective-noun lines were also searched for in Google Books, double-quoted, in order to find a (relative frequency) count for the possible line as a word sequence. Only phrases with zero results (no hits) were selected. I call these word sequences 'zero counts'. At the time of searching they had not yet been indexed in the Google Books' 'corpus'.

Figure 3a prints 1,020 subsequent texts, here in a minute typeface. As a function of my own further design, these 'poems' share more than the original generative constraints. I read and then *read into* the verses of the first 'Monoclonal Microphone' narrative and semantic arcs that can be encoded in a speculative, elided grammar thus: *After* roomy parentage / *comes* irresponsible falconry. // Homespun blockade *reinforces* / bodily deliberation. // *Oh* unsound angler – // *an* antagonistic jamming *of* / languorous motivation, / *the* infamous plasma *of* / closeted anatomy.

For the generation of the field of poems in Figure 3a, the number of both lines and verses in the model were preserved and the literal composition of the lines also follows the rules of verse-break generation. Note, for example, that the letter 'e' does not occur in any of the poems' lines six through to eight, for this reason. More significantly, collocated phrases including the above added grammar words have been searched in Google to ensure that they do occur in Google's general corpus, with a count of sixtyfive or greater. For example, from the top-leftmost poem in Figure 3b 'after coincident' was searched, as was 'generalship comes' and 'comes stratified'. When actually reading (assuming this is graphically possible) any of the poems printed in Figure 3a, one should always be able to add in these same words from this model - 'after', 'comes', 'reinforces', 'oh', 'a'/'an', 'of', 'the' and 'of' – and discover a more determinate reading, one that is sometimes uncannily appropriate given the relatively arbitrary and indeterminate processes that have otherwise given rise to these texts.

As here reproduced in Figure 3a, the 1,020 texts underlying their initial seed and template text cannot be read by humans (fig. 3a). However, their virtual linguistic artefactuality is accurately represented by graphic traces and I have, above, provided an exposition of the generative principles - alluding in this case to actual code - that determine the disposition of the graphic marks. In Figure 3b, a part of the same image has been scaled up such that actual human reading of six instances of the text becomes possible (fig. 3b). I have read these poems; you may read them now. My question is to ask: Is this enough? The six poems that you and I have now read certainly exist. What about the rest that have not yet been 'scaled up' for you?

There are a number of continuous 'scales' of readability that we may apply to our experiences of these texts and the virtual possibility of our bringing them into actual language as we do so. The most obvious and material of these is literal graphic scale. I scaled Figure 3b in order to make six instances of the texts readable and, arbitrarily, so that they fitted neatly beside the overall image (fig. 3a) of one plus 1,020 (unreadable) texts. On a computer screen or tablet, Figure 3b could have been zoomed in continuously. For particular readers the texts may have entered human readability at very



■ Figure 2a-d: Illustration demonstrating the catastrophic emergence of linguistic diegesis. *Digital photographs*, 2013, courtesy of the author.



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<sup>10</sup> The discussion, below, of our last example from distinctly computational digital language art refers to an exemplary and *executable* instance of such criticism.

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■ Figure 3b. Screenshots based on a digital print by the author, Monoclonal Microphone, 1020+1, 2011. Screenshots, 2013, courtesy of the author.



different points during this zoom. However, the strange and singular moment at which the text becomes readable will always have what I call a 'catastrophic' quality for human readers, demonstrating the sudden diegetic break when a constructed artefactuality – up until this moment *ambiguously* an artefactuality of, in this case, visual or linguistic material – suddenly and unambiguously enters the world of language.

The other 'scale' of readability that I want to invoke here is represented by the extent and degree of our interpretive, critical attention to the code and programmatic composition of the text. Earlier I referred to a possible objection to my 'strong' argument: that computationally generated text does not exist as language until it comes into relationship with human readability. Programmers may, compositionally, anticipate human readings that their virtual text will generate and may argue that this is enough to guarantee a relationship of some kind with human readability. Whatever their program produces should be treated as language as such. I say that we have here a number of continuous scales of attention to and interpretation of these

computational and compositional processes. For the work to exist, as language, a human reader must still come to some catastrophic moment in their experience of virtual linguistic artefacts when the work ceases to be ambiguously a set of arbitrary symbolic processes and also, suddenly, becomes an actual event and effect of language. To approach this moment is the purpose of critical software studies and also that of an expanded sense of literary criticism that would embrace the kind of 'reading' represented by my description, above, of the pseudo-code corresponding to that which generates the texts of 'Monoclonal Microphone'.<sup>10</sup> As programmer and critic, I believe that I have made something that will make language; as human reader, I do not believe that this language truly, actually exists as such unless and until I can read it

## MONOCIONAL MICROPHONE MONOCIONAL MICROPHONE coincident generalship adjacent pellagra stratified continuance juvenile camcorder craggy clearance obsolescent viewer stupid carob seventh catering libertarian prefecture undefeated truism biracial docudrama portly insinuation gymnastic goodwill cajun scarcity stuffy incorporation horticultural bronc unimpeded swap wrenching impurity MONOCLONAL MICROPHONE **MONOCLONAL MICROPHONE** desultory magnetism somersaulting forecast segmented tumbleweed unfeasible explosion luminescent celebration divisive parole earthbound suite contractual bigness fragmented absenteeism amphibious lifeblood rotund handclasp doctrinal circuitry introductory silo stringed lineman dang boon knightly stroking honcombatant crony thespian gratification MONOCLONAL MICROPHON MONOCLONAL MICROPHONE infertile sedimentation commie\_barracks typewritten confidence granular omission doggie cabin nonpolitical mason intimate abortionist imaginative sociopath indomitable gainer glitzy franking disgusting sauna piddling dollop slimy whisky rabbinical ant atypical woodwind upstanding apricot tabby attendee countervailing bosom

and, if I so wish, give it voice. It may also be the case that, as I attempt to read, I find that the linguistic artefact before me cannot, for whatever reason, be given voice. Or I refuse to give it voice. I refuse to perform it. In this case, I may, naturally, deny its possibility of crossing over into the world of language.

Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland's 'Sea and spar between' is something of a tour de force of unambiguously literary, unambiguously computational, digital language art (Montfort and Strickland 2010). Recently, the authors have, moreover, produced a discussion of 'creative code in comments', as an online journal article, 'a discussion of (and an edition of)' this same work, 'Sea and spar between'. This extraordinary article is also executable JavaScript code - the essential module from whatever is necessary to execute 'Sea and Spar between' in most modern browsers - but with extended, eminently human-readable and continuous comments, that explain the generative and, in the authors' view, creative processes of the code (Montfort and Strickland 2013). Strickland is a pioneer of fine poetic writing - human composition pointedly embedded within elaborate digital media frameworks - the latter having both significant and affective influence on the presentation and reception of her texts - in works such as V - WaveSon.nets. V - losing *l'una* and 'slippingglimpse' (Strickland 2002; Strickland, Jaramillo and Ryan 2007). Montfort's work often represents an epitome of computational software devices that are coded to generate, without further human compositional intervention, virtual linguistic artefacts, artefacts that do undoubtedly derive, from their coding alone, a certain relationship with readability and, therefore, in the terms at least of my more forgiving argument, may be considered to produce actual language.<sup>11</sup> In 'Sea and spar between' the two authors work together, embedding literary compositional principles from Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson into their hard-coded data sets, and then deploy Montfort's considerable coding skills to build a piece of software capable of

generating 'a number of stanzas comparable to the number of fish in the sea, around 225 trillion'. Both Montfort and Strickland read performatively from their computationally inflected or generated work in public. Both have read together from 'Sea and spar between'. My question, in this context, is: What does their act of 'giving voice' to (some part) of the generated text perform? Is it what brings these texts into the world of language?

I do not presuppose that there are simple or straightforward answers to questions such as these. My concern is clearly with issues surrounding human performative engagement with what may be indeterminate symbolic processes, specifically performative engagements derived from cultures of human reading. I am suggesting that a potential for actual human reading - readability - brings virtual linguistic artefacts into the world as language. At this point in my thinking, it is unclear to me whether an expositional (metaphoric) 'reading' of the processes in question - as undertaken in Montfort and Strickland's 'cut to fit the tool-spun course: Discussing creative code in context' (Montfort and Strickland 2013) - is enough to bring (all of) this virtual language into actuality. We can open up our browsers and display a screen with many of the verses that can be generated by the code; we can literally, conventionally read and consider these verses, certainly bringing them - the displayed verses - into language. On the other hand - as for Raymond Queneau's Cent mille milliards de poèmes (trans: A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems) - it would be literally impossible for anyone to read all of the possible verses. If we can only bring some minuscule portion of a huge virtual linguistic artefact into actual existence for our critical consideration, for our reading, does or should the work exist at all? What is it beyond its 'executable' description and any 'authorized' literary qualities - cited here from the highly regarded work of canonical authors - that are inscribed in its data?

When we consider generated virtual linguistic artefacts, there is something else that is given

<sup>11</sup> The series of works I am thinking of is Montfort (2008).

to them when they are read, apart, that is, from the ontological gift of a more integral and actual existence as constituent of language. Reading will associate the text read with any readers it acquires. Its first human reader is likely to be identical with the person we are accustomed to call its author. However, if linguistic artefacts are generated without regard to their anticipated reading or if we do not accept that their programmer's anticipated virtual reading is enough to bring these artefacts, potentially, into language, then it is possible for linguistic artefacts to make traces on our screens (chiefly) without their having been associated with any human individual. That aspect of the symbolic that reaches most viscerally into the our understanding of humanity and language is the proposal that human language (human-readable symbolic practice) is precisely that which, in so far as it is possible to inscribe, survives the absence of writer (and/or first reader) and may thus survive the death of this person, while still continuing to exist as language. I would propose that there is no such possibility for virtual linguistic artefacts if they are not read or they are not readable, if they do not form part of a human act, a performance of reading.

We may briefly consider a contrasting literary work, contrasting with 'Monoclonal Microphone' and 'Sea and spar between'. Ironically perhaps, this is a work by one of the exemplary early practitioners of digitally mediated literature. Moreover, the work would be impossible to manage and it would be impossible to generate certain of its outcomes (including readable outcomes) without the affordances of digital mediation and the network. I am referring to 'Skin: A story published on the skin of 2095 volunteers' (Jackson 2003). This story has been composed by Shelley Jackson but we cannot read it, as composed – not vet and, I believe, perhaps not ever. But the story, as it was written, did have at least one human reader, Jackson, whose authorial integrity is well attested. A total of 2,095 volunteers will eventually contact Jackson and agree to have one of the story's words tattooed somewhere on their body.

These words are inscribed on the mortal flesh of the volunteers who read them, allowing, we presume, others with whom they are close to read these words also. These individuals cannot know or read the 'whole story' but they know it exists and that they may be able to read it in some virtual future. The people with the tattoos are called 'words'. Some of them have already died; more of them may do so. One day the story will be as complete as it will ever be. Words will be missing but there will remain a record of these words and the text of the story will be, inherently - ontologically I would venture - recoverable because, somewhat paradoxically, given that the entire story cannot be read as published, this is a text that is maximally integrated with a very particular and unusual but very powerful, ethical, moral and mortal culture of human reading.

Earlier in the course of this essay, I proposed that if human reading is required in order to affirm the ontological status of a linguistic artefact, then an ethics of digital language arts practice was suggested. There is an imperative to read and to perform works that may otherwise remain indistinguishable from that part of chaos that consists in symbolic noise and insignificant, ineffective transaction. There is also now, I believe, a politics and a social ethics. At this current moment in history, symbolic processes are propagated over networked programmable media in order to provide services of various kinds for human users. We agree, by using these services, to (generally speaking) non-mutual, non-reciprocal terms of use. These processes are undoubtedly addressed to humans, but they are now set running on systems that manage data and interactions on a scale that makes effective human interaction, including any comprehensive reading (even of indexes and aggregations), more or less impossible. Moreover, the processes are motivated, primarily, so as to direct attention (towards advertisement) or to allow transaction (chiefly commercial), all in order to accumulate marginal profits on behalf of the service providers. Such a statement is, perhaps, part of one human, but distant reading of the symbolic

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practice that is generated as a kind of sociopolitical metatext by these processes. It is not a literal, interpretive reading of this 'text' in terms of language, in terms of its significance and affect as a chaotic, implicated mass of linguistic artefacts. It is not the sort of reading that would bring the symbolic practices of network services into the being of language as such. For such a reading to be possible, these processes would have to become commensurate with human experience, with the full extent and range of significance and affect that we ascribe to human readers. This, they are not. They focus on those aspects of our shared world that are over-determined by commerce and control and, ultimately, ill-distributed power. Our situation calls for a reading and a performance of the virtual, pseudo-language with which we now constantly transact and that constantly draws our attention. I believe that if we attempt such a reading we will find that there is very little, among the countless, ever-spinning threads of a big data on the inter-networked web-cloud, that we would be able to bring into the actually existing world of language. Other kinds of writing must continue to be made and given voice - writing that can be read and that will exist.

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